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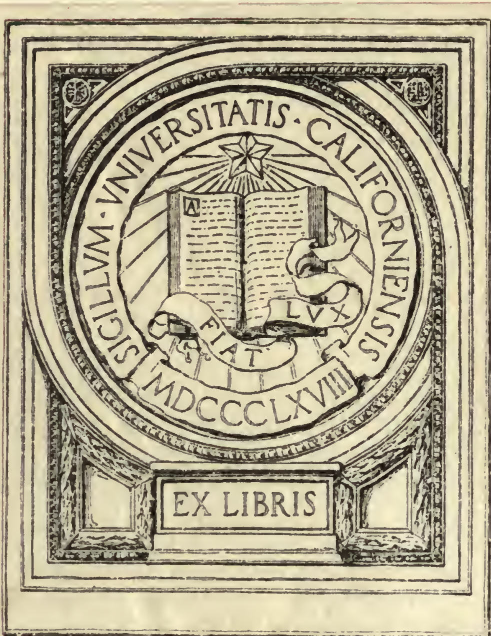

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DESCRIPTION

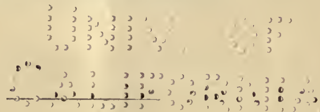
OF A

TRIP TO CALIFORNIA,

WITH THE BOARD OF MANAGERS OF THE NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS.

DELIVERED TO THE MEMBERS OF THE NORTHWESTERN BRANCH, MILWAUKEE, WIS., BY

JOHN L. MITCHELL.



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DESCRIPTION

OF A

TRIP TO CALIFORNIA.

After a trip of some seven thousand miles at Uncle Sam's expense, I feel it almost a duty to give an accounting to somebody. No more appropriate body, it seems to me, could be found than the members of the N. W. Branch, to whom, upon a time, Uncle Sam owed a continuance of his existence.

The trip in question was made by the National Board of Soldiers' Homes, under instructions from Congress to proceed to the Pacific Coast, and select a site for a National Branch somewhere west of the Rocky Mountains.

The point of rendezvous is Jersey City. On the evening of November 8th, 1887, we board the car St. Nicholas, which becomes our home on wheels for many a week. In it we speed, swifter than the flight of a migratory bird, across the continent.

Our first halting place is the Central Branch at Dayton, Ohio—the mother institution, with its four thousand members.

(Magic lantern view—Campus, Dayton.)

This scene represents the campus at the moment of review. The sun shines bright. The band fills the air with exhilerating sounds. The boys are putting their best foot

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foremost (those that have one). They are stepping out as briskly as if they had just heard dinner call on Christmas day.

Our experience east of the Missouri river I shall not dwell upon—it is the sameness of the often-trodden path. West of the Missouri, however, each succeeding step yields a freshness, a zest of exploration.

Our journey beyond the Missouri I shall divide under three general heads: from Omaha westward to San Francisco, via Salt Lake City; from San Francisco southward to San Diego, via Los Angeles; and from San Diego eastward to Leavenworth, via Las Vegas.

On the evening of November 14th we leave Omaha. Thence the road follows the valleyof the Platte river some 350 miles. After the summer's sun has parched the herbage, the aspect of the valley is impressive—unpleasantly so. In the bottom it appears to be a desert. The bordering bluffs are rocky, inhospitable. They present an irregular, castellated front. There would be little strain on the imagination to fancy them fortresses retired from business, dismantled and dilapidated. At top these hills, or, precisely speaking, table lands, are flat as the proverbial pancake. They look as if the Hand of Providence had patted them not unkindly, but too hard. On account of this formation they are called "benches." Who sits upon them, I cannot say. Possibly the long-legged giant that frightened us in the story book.

In the midst of this dreary scene, between straggling cottonwoods, flow the ashen waters of the Platte. It is said that in the matter of depth, the Platte river is as deceptive as the make-up of a fashionable woman; where it looks shoal it is deep and where it looks deep it is shallow.

The old-time emigrant trail took its course along the valley of the Platte, and the south bank of the river formed

one wide thoroughfare. Religious fanaticism and the greed for gold played a thrilling drama on the broad theatre between the Missouri and the Pacific coast. In 1844, or thereabouts, John C. Fremont gave to the world his general impressions of the far-west. From 1840 to 1848, some 20,000 white people, chiefly from Illinois and Missouri, as if seized with an uncontrollable impulse, rushed across the plains and mountains to the Mexican district of California and the disputed land of Oregon. In 1847 about 10,000 exiled Mormons crossed to and located in Utah, and in 1848 and '49, all the adventurers of the nation turned themselves loose for the placer gold mines of California. This last movement continued with scarcely any decline till 1852. In five years about 400,000 persons crossed the plains.

Gold was discovered in California in February, 1848, more than half a year before the Mexican war was officially ended, and California made American by the treaty of Guadaloupe Hidalgo.

The prairie schooner, with its sails set for the occident, has disappeared.

From our window we catch sight of herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, with here and there a horse,—all cropping the sun-cured bunch grass, more nutritious, it is claimed, dry than green. It is this grass that the cattle "rustle" for and subsist upon during the winter.

(View—The Prairie Dog.)

This region is inhabited by the prairie dog: a small brownish animal; a burrower and of the rodent kind, living congregationally. He utters a sharp bark, hence his name. He is a timid creature and bobs into his hole on slight provocation. In former days the dog towns were numerous in the valley; other animals also abounded.

The country was crossed from south to north with innumerable paths, cut deep into the sod, where the bison had trailed himself in long lines and countless hosts from Texas to Manitoba, and back again, spring and autumn. Then the coyote, gray thief of the wilderness, yelped the night watches away. Herds of antelope appeared for a moment and were gone like phantoms. Skulking bands of Apaches, dragging all their possessions upon lodge-poles tied to their lean ponies, added a touch of apprehension to a scene whose desolation was otherwise unbroken for thousands of square miles.

In fact this was favorite hunting ground for the Indians—ground that they did not cede to the white settlers without a desperate defense.

The soil hereabouts is streaked white with alkali and the water is strongly impregnated with it.

Leaving the valley of the Platte, the locomotive puffs itself up grade until it reaches Sherman, 8242 feet above sea-level, the highest point on the road. This is the easterly range of the Rocky mountains, or the Black Hills. The scenery of the Rockies is picturesque, even grotesque, from the heaping one upon the other of red, sausage-ball looking boulders. Occasionally a salient rock strikes one with its dignity. This region wears a weird, uncanny look, that tells of terrible physical commotion. To the schooled geologist it must be full of interest; to the liker of the fantastic in scenery it is fascinating; but to the seeker after grandeur in the landscape—the majesty of the Alps—the rib of the continent, I should think, might be disappointing.

We cross the middle range of the Rockies, or the Continental Divide, at night. Morning finds us descending Echo Cañon in the midst of the Wasatch mountains, a spur of the Uintah. Here the road runs notched in the per-

cipitous sides of a ravine. Above us tower fantastic rock-forms—of pillar, dome and spire,—and mighty boulders piled high by Titan hands, while far below, deep in the water-quarried rock, surges the green current of the creek.

Shortly we emerge into the expansive, fruitful valley of Salt Lake. After leaving the main line at Ogden, we reach Salt Lake City on the morning of November 16th. This is the city of many mothers-in law.

(View—Salt Lake City.)

Salt Lake City had its beginning when Orson Pratt, one of the elect, on the 22d of July, 1847, "spied out the land." It contains some thirty thousand inhabitants. It is built upon a plain almost imperceptibly sloping from the plateau at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains on the east to the river Jordan on the west, in a broad and, with artificial watering, fertile valley. The city is two miles square, with streets eight rods wide, laid out in blocks of ten acres each. Purifying streams, drawn from the neighboring cañons, flow in every quarter. The buildings are mostly of adobe. The business portion of the city is not unlike that of a thriving town in Wisconsin. The dwellings are small, low and neatly painted. They are far apart, the result of the cheapness of real estate and of the peculiar domestic habits of the people. Most of them are surrounded by orchards and gardens, systematically irrigated —nothing could be grown without this process.

The population is divided, socially and politically, into two defiant factions—Mormon and Gentile. The Mormons have an overwhelming majority and wield the political power. They run municipal matters to their liking, and hold with a jealous grasp that which they have wrested from the wilderness. This is not surprising, for they made

a weary tramp and have borne the labor and heat of the day in constructing a city. The disparity of forces is not exactly in the ratio of the numbers; the Gentiles are mostly men, and young men at that, and of some intelligence; the Mormons are mainly of a low order of mind, and in large proportion women. The men have an unmistakably hard look. They are not the sort of chaps that could get a discount at the bank without the collateral. The Mormon women are evidently not the houris of the harems of the orient, such as existed in Byron's imagination. Those that I saw on the street were faded crones, ill-clad, with flaring sun-bonnets to hide their very much matured features. If there were any good lookers, they were safe at home under lock and key. I am informed that, as a rule, the Mormon women are not supported by their husbands, but work for their own living. In some cases they even give the old man a lift. These women are mostly English, Welsh and Scandinavian.

During the day we visited Fort Douglass, a military garrison and safeguard of the Gentiles, distant some two miles. Upon an eminence at the base of the mountains, it overlooks the city and commands it with its guns. The view from the camp gratifies the eye. Immediately to the right, rising to an altitude of 1200 feet, stands the "mount of prophesy." To the top of this promontory Brigham Young was wont to climb, that he might wrestle single-handed with the Lord. In front and below the swell of land on which the fort is situated, the low-roofed houses of the city lie scattered—innumerable white flecks in a field of brown, each dwelling nestling in an orchard of its own. In the middle ground—like an upturned metal wash basin—significant of the washing away of sins that goes on beneath it—glitters the oval roof of the tabernacle. Beyond and far away the great Salt Lake shimmers like a big

elongated emerald set in the bosom of the hills. To the right and left sweeps the interminable, wide-spreading valley, while close behind us rise the lofty Wasatch, snow-tipped, red-sided, "rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun."

Altogether, in its scenic beauties, its industries, its mines and its peculiar institution, Salt Lake City, I consider the most interesting point for observation in this country.

(View—Interior of Tabernacle.)

The tabernacle is oblong in shape, having a length of 250 feet from east to west, by 150 feet in width. The roof is supported by 46 columns of cut sand stone. From these pillars the roof springs in one unbroken arch, forming the largest self-supporting roof in the country, with the exception of the Grand Union Depot, New York. The ceiling of the roof is 65 feet above the floor. In one end of this egg-shaped building is the organ, the second in size in America.

(View of Eagle Gate—Entrance to B. Young's Farm.)

This property is surrounded by a high wall of masonry.

The eagle and the bee-hive are respectively symbolical of strength and industry.

Returning to Ogden, we take the main line again, skirting for a time Salt Lake. This lake is about 100 miles long and over 50 wide. Its water is of the deep green of mid-ocean, and strong enough with salt to float a potato. In it there swims no living thing. Its shores are shell-less. It is a veritable dead sea. Beyond it we traverse the "American desert." This is the basin of an inland sea, dried up in the ages long past. Wave marks here and there on the elevations, and the surf-rounded pebbles of old beach lines tell of the waters which once covered the plain. Salt and alkali spot the surface. Worn sea shells drift with the

shifting sands. Here is silence and desolation. To become productive of anything useful, this region will have to wait until miracle time comes 'round again.

(View of Kelton.)

Kelton, a semi-deserted frontier town. A lively place and a "tough" one, once upon a time,—a community counting "that day as lost, whose low descending sun saw no man killed or other mischief done." Their distinguished men all died with their boots on and were buried ditto. This was the spot that Longfellow had in mind when he wrote about "foot-prints on the sands of time,"—a place to make tracks out of, and double quick at that. We saw no sign of life, save a sombre, solitary crow on wavering wing, and an attenuated pig making his toilet against a shanty. As the train moved off, it was doubtful which would stand up the longest, the pig or the shanty.

During the night we cross the Nevada line, mount a range of hills, then dip down into the valley of the Humboldt river, a stream rising in the mountains, and running some two hundred and fifty miles to empty into a lake of the same name.

Early morning finds us at Wadsworth, some 300 miles east of San Francisco. Indians were hanging around the depot—Piutes, I believe.

It has become usage to allow the Indians to ride free upon the platforms. They were given the privilege when the railroad was being built, on condition that they should not interfere with the work or obstruct the trains. The Indians naturally thought that the evil spirit possessed the locomotive. The exclamation of a Piute chief on first seeing a train in motion was graphic: "Heap wagon, no horse."

Through snow sheds in the cuts we ascend the Sierra Nevada to Summit, 7,000 feet above sea level. The scenery

of the Sierras is not unlike that of the Alleghenies. The teeth are as symmetrical as saw teeth, hence the name, Sierra, a saw. They are pine-clad and green, and cut from each other by deep and narrow ravines. They have a look of life, not the weird and death-like solemnity of the Rockies.

Winding down the western declivity of the Sierras, we pass through a district of placer mining. Here the hydraulic process has washed huge gaps in the sides of the mountains. Lower down, the foot-hills in every direction are striped with rows of orchard trees and vines. Finally we touch the level of the Sacramento river, and towards sundown we enter the capital city of California. Here we stop for a while to give a committee of citizens time to enlarge (I use the the term advisedly) upon the advantages of Sacramento as a site for a soldiers' home. I will make a statement of general application: Wherever the Board travelled, west of the Rockies, it was met at important places by committees of leading citizens, who gave all needed information, and who treated it with a cordial, free-handed hospitality.

After dark, on the evening of Nov. 18th, we arrive at Oakland. Across the bay, some three miles away, we sight the glimmering lights of San Francisco. Thither the ferry boat rapidly transports us.

In San Francisco and the towns that cluster around the bay there is probably a population approaching 300,000. Here, forty years ago, there were but a few hundred whites. The gold fever of 1848 gave San Francisco its impetus. Here are gathered representatives of every clime, making it the most cosmopolitan of cities. From Chinatown, a sort of Canton transplanted, a short walk brings us to the wharves, where Neapolitan fishermen are singing barcarolles and drying their seines in the sun.

The bay of San Francisco stretches its arms eastward and southward for many miles, forming the grandest harbor in the world. It connects with the Pacific by a narrow strait (about a mile wide) called the Golden Gate. On a strip of land, six miles across, which divides the bay from the ocean, terraced into steep hill sides, rises the city of San Francisco. It fronts eastward towards the bay, while between it and the sea beach intervene billowy, unstable sand hills. In fact, the city might be called Sand Francisco, without impropriety. Tiers of balconies and bay windows cover the fronts of dwellings, seemingly with the intent of gathering every ray of sunshine. For fear of earthquakes the upper story of the business buildings does not venture far from the foundation.

On the whole, San Francisco impresses one as a city of solid prosperity, and a pleasant one to live in.

(View of Seal Rocks.)

Seal rocks in front of the Cliff House, a noted resort near San Francisco, facing the Pacific. The rocks are the favorite resting place of these amphibious animals. Sunning their russett bodies, they look from the shore like caterpillars on an over-populated leaf.

Chinatown is the most curious part of San Francisco. Here are crowded together Mongolians by the thousands. I am not inclined to discuss in this paper the Chinese question. I will content myself with a few views—photographic ones.

(View—Interior of Chinese restaurant, sacred to dessicated duck and pickled puppy.)

(View—Front of Joss House, temple of the gods.)

(View—Paternal solicitude, à la Chinoise.)

(View—Juveniles—samples of both sexes.).

We stay in San Francisco for a week, devoting our time to hearing the advocates of the different localities and to making trips of examination to the spots that seemed the most promising. We visit the present state Soldiers' Home, at Yountville in the Napa Valley,—a few hours ride by boat and rail. This is a lonesome, arid valley having a precarious water supply, and deep with dust at this season. When the two hundred inmates march out for inspection, Goldsmith's line occurs to me: "Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow." The boys are not altogether happy out here. But, like the man who had the wolf by the ears—they don't wan't to hold on, and they dare not let go. The completion of the National Branch in Southern California will relieve them from this dilemma.

We make an excursion to Santa Rosa Valley, running parallel to the Napa Valley and separated from it by a range of high hills. This neighborhood is devoted mainly to the production of wine and dried fruits. The slopes are vine clad; orchards cover the plain.

We take a trip to Monterey, 136 miles south of San Francisco, passing through a park-like country, dotted with spreading oaks. The residences of San Francisco magnates are strung along the line. Bancroft Library

Monterey is historic ground. Its bay was discovered by Cabarillo in 1542. In 1770 the priest Junipero founded a mission here. It was here, in 1846, that Commodore Stockton hoisted the American flag, taking possession of California in the name of the United States. A graceful curve in the shore encloses a placid bay. This, and the thickly wooded heights are the charms of Monterey. They held captive several members of the board until they struck something prettier.

(View of Squat oaks, crowning a knoll near the El Monte Hotel, Monterey.)

We take our final departure from San Francisco on Nov. 29th, heading southward. During the night we traveled through the San Joaquin Valley, about 200 miles in length and an average of thirty in with.

To understand the topography of this part of California, it is necessary to imagine a mountain wall, the Sierras running almost north and south on the eastern side, diminishing in altitude towards the southern end, and at last losing itself in the Mojave plain. West of this is the Coast Range, inferior in height. Between the two lies an immense valley, the northern half being known as the Sacramento Valley, the southern half as the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin river rises in the Tulare lake and runs northward. The Sacramento river rises near Mount Shasta on the confines of Oregon, and runs southward. These two rivers take a sharp turn westward and flow into the bay of San Francisco, emptying their mingled waters into the Pacific Ocean through the Golden Gate. These two great valleys, stretching some 450 miles, are really one. They constitute, with the exception of a narrow rim along the coast, the California of the north. Counting in all the nooks and corners and the small valleys, separated from the main ones by spurs of the main ranges, the total area of the great valley of California, and that some time or other will be cultivated, is more than 30,000,000 of acres. The dweller in a prairie state will feel a disgust for a country with so much waste land, so much howling wilderness and unredeemable rock and cañon and mountain tops. But the fatness of the valleys compensates largely for this barrenness.

We awake at Keene, a station among the mountains. We are crossing the transverse range of the Sierras, which abruptly separates Northern from Southern California.

Leaving Tehachapi summit, 4,000 feet above the sea, we begin a gradual descent to the Mojave desert.

(A characteristic view in the Mojave desert; sand, yucca palms, and big cacti presenting the contortions of the snakes on Medusa's head.)

Leaving the desert and piercing the Coast Range, we skirt the Pacific for some distance and reach Santa Barbara towards evening.

The neighborhood of Santa Barbara is similar in topography to the famed Riviera of the Mediterranean, and runs east and west. The Inez mountains, parallel with it, cut off the northerly winds, while their rocky sides reflect the heat of the sun upon the plain beneath. This slopes southward gently to the sea. In front the Pacific spreads its placid waters, with its islands, dreamy, indistinct, in the hazy distance.

Santa Barbara, under a cloudless sky, is attractive beyond description.

(The Mission of Santa Barbara, founded about one hundred years ago by Father Junipero the pioneer of Spanish civilization in California.)

(Court of the Mission.)

Ladies are not permitted to enter its sacred precincts. Gen. McMahon took this photo. It represents Gen. Martin impressing upon the monk the advantages of Kansas over California as a health resort.

At dusk on the 29th of November, we alight at Los Angeles.

It is the boast of Los Angeles that it has rejoiced in a century of summers—civilized summer, be it understood—since the mission was established in 1781.

"In this auspicious clime,
The fields are florid with unfading prime;
From the bleak pole no winds inclement blow—
Mould the round hail or flake the fleecy snow."

On account of its beautiful location, midway between the mountains and the sea (twenty miles distant), its delightful climate and the fertility of the soil, the Spaniards called it Pueblo de la reina de los Angeles—"town of the queen of the angels." Near by there is a name still more inviting—"Pasadena"—gateway to Eden.

The city is 500 miles south of San Francisco. It lies along the Los Angeles river—a brawling stream in winter; in summer a mild-mannered creek. The city limits comprise an area of thirty-six square miles, and contain a population of from 60,000 to 70,000. An extensive system of irrigation supplies the gardens, orchards and orange groves with abundant water.

The intrusive, obtrusive American has brushed away any romance that may at one time have attached to the old-fashioned Mexican and his rose-embowered adobe. The tinkle of the mission's church-going bell is lost in this modern Babel. Los Angeles to-day is simply a stirring, booming city. Its capital stock is its climate. This, the real estate men are busy loading up the one-lunged Yankees with. The price of real estate in Los Angeles is double what it is in Milwaukee, similarly located.

During our stay in Los Angeles, rain falls for the first time since our arrival in California. It was a precursor of the rainy season. In California the alternatives of the seasons are not from cold to warm—the temperature being equable throughout the year. The seasons vary between dry and wet. The respective limits of these seasons are not distinctly defined. The wet season usually lasts from November to May, the dry season the remainder of the year.

Leaving Los Angeles at six o'clock in the evening, we reach San Diego early on the morning of December 1st. The city is built on an eminence commanding a magnificent view

of the harbor at its feet and the Pacific ocean beyond. To the north Point Loma juts out into the sea. To the south rise the mountains of Mexico. It is sixteen miles to the border. We have reached the Ultima Thule—Uncle Sam's jumping-off place. The enterprise of San Diego is astonishing, as is that of its twin town, National City, terminus of the Santa Fé Railroad. These two have platted lots enough to carry a population of half a million. Pretty much all Southern California is platted for that matter.

(View of bananas growing in the open air in front of the Florence Hotel, San Diego.)

(View of Coronado Beach and Point Loma entrance to the harbor of San Diego.)

(View of Court of the Hotel on Coronado Beach, a hotel as complete in its appointments and as capacious as any sea-side hostelry in the country. I was told that it had a thousand bed-rooms.)

(Specimens from an ostrich farm in the neighborhood of San Diego.) It is thought that feathers can be raised profitably.

(Dam of Sweetwater creek, near National City.) The reservoir will store six thousand million gallons of water. This work will cost about $700,000.

On the evening of Dec. 2, we turn our faces eastward. During all of the following day we keep in sight of the snow range of the San Bernardino.

(View of the Snow mountains.)

(Group at Hesperia, a town several miles square on paper, but without a single inhabitant. There is nothing but sand and yucca palms as far as the eye can reach.)

(View of a huge yucca palm. This kind of tree is called the Lord's candlestick. Generals Martin and McMahon are seated beneath it and are trying to catch some of the drip.)

Next morning finds us in Arizona. We halt at Peach Springs. A line of stages runs from this point to the Grand Cañon of the Colorado.

Arizona is a region upon which the sun of civilization is just breaking. It presents a scene of wide pasture lands, vast mountain ranges rich with ores, lava beds that seem to have scorched their fiery course through the valleys in comparatively modern times, rushing streams, pine forests, gorges and caverns.

(Scene of railroad accident. The rails spread apart, the cars leave the track, and the train narrowly escapes plunging into the ravine.)

We pass from Arizona into New Mexico. Leaving the basin of the Colorado, which flows into the Gulf of California, we enter the valley of the Rio Grande, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. New Mexico is only new in name. Long ago this mountain realm formed the northern outpost of the Spanish empire, which flourished far away to the south. The natives still use a cumbrous cart with wooden wheels. They continue to dwell in houses built of mud bricks, and they plow with sharpened sticks.

This is the land of brilliant sunshine, mountain shadows, blue distances, thin air and general drought. In New Mexico there is no dyspepsia, no epidemic disease and no worry about the railroad stock market.

(Mount Bernal, a castle-like rock that dominates the plain.)

(Pueblo Indians, woman and girl selling bits of turquoise and obsidian.) The woman is a centenarian hag, as shriveled as a mummy of the Nile. About her face the skin hangs in folds; her bead eyes peer through a shock of grizzled hair; the fingers with which she clutches the coin resemble the claws of a bird of prey.

Towards evening we strike the wide plateau, encircled by mountains called Las Vegas—the meadows. This plain is 6400 feet above the sea. It is another Engadine for salubrity. At this altitude breathing is difficult for the new comer. Las Vegas proved, so far as its main object went, the culminating point of our journey. Here the Board took a decisive vote on the selection of a site for the Home on the Pacific coast. The choice fell on a tract of 300 acres a few miles west of Los Angeles, and not far from the Pacific ocean. The land had been offered free, together with a bonus of $100,000 for beautifying the grounds. This ~~fact~~ was a glittering bait and the Board swallowed it.

On this favored spot will be erected a home that shall stand a fit monument to the courage, the patriotism, and the humanity of the coast.

The mission of the Board was accomplished, a mission unique in California's history.

The Board had gathered its scattering members and had journeyed to the Pacific. It was not drawn thither by thought of the precious metals, nor by the real estate boom, nor by considerations of health. It went upon an errand of pure humanity,—to select some spot where the weary soldier might rest his limbs,—some Mecca for every hobbling pilgrim in distress.

During the night of December 7th we traverse Colorado. At daybreak Gov. Martin makes the discovery that we are

in the state of Kansas. We have returned to the land of hogs and corn-cribs.

At Topeka, the capital, Gov. Martin entertains us. Among other interesting things he shows us a stuffed buffalo—last of his race—on Kansas plain his hoof shall ne'er resound again.

We arrive at Leavenworth on December 18th. After an inspection of the Branch and a routine meeting, the Board disperses.

Description of a trip M681
to California

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